

Romance in the Air Combined With Sudden Turns and Surprises Which Involve Both Mystery and Action.

NON-STOP

BY
EDWIN BALMER.

PAUL CRANSTON was alone in his airplane in a meadow beside the new concrete Northwest trail out of Chicago, where trucks and motor cars rushed by. "Fly!" invited Paul's big placard beside the concrete. "Drive in and fly!" But no one drove in; so Paul wiped his hands and sat down in the shade of a wing and snapped the string around the brown paper containing his lunch.

He ate the fruit first and was considering whether he would eat anything more, when he noticed that a new roadster had turned from the road and was approaching over the dry grass of his field.

He saw that the driver was a girl and that she was alone; so, as he arose, he diagnosed her monotonously to himself, "another thrill chaser." They kept him in business—the thrill chasers, but he was growing weary of them. They flew not so much for the glory of the flight as to brag about it afterward.

"Good morning; where's the pilot?" this girl greeted him.

"I'm Paul Cranston," Paul replied.

"Where's Paul Cranston, I mean?" she corrected, with plain indication that Paul Cranston would not be this oil and sweat stained man in khaki.

"I am Paul Cranston."

"Oh!" she took his word for it, then apologized. "I'm sure I beg your pardon. I'd read about you, you see, and just now driving in with the sun in my eyes—"

"Of course, I see," Paul put in, and he did, for he knew what she had read about him.

It was a decidedly flattering write-up of the Cranstons in general, which had appeared in the Chicago papers when he started his flying field a couple of months ago. Not having a great deal to say for Paul himself, except that he had been trained during the war and had flown in France, the newspapers naturally made much of the fact that he was of the Providence Cranstons, and so this girl had natural expectations of a far more impressive person than Paul.

"However, since you are Mr. Cranston," she went on practically, "shall we get down to business?"

"That's what I'm here for," Paul admitted.

"All right then; do you take on special commissions?"

"Of course; but to special places and under special conditions?"

"Yes, I can."

"And you can keep it quiet? Not say a word about it?"

"Certainly I can, if you wish," Paul agreed.

"You'll fly me to Detroit before 4 o'clock, then? I simply have to be there by 4 or there's no use trying at all. And—well, I simply have to make it. So if you can get me there, and keep it absolutely quiet, name your own figure."

"Step down," Paul invited.

"You mean you'll do it?"

"Non-stop to Detroit is a fairly large order," Paul admitted, "but for an adequate reason I can do it."

"Believe me, the reason's adequate," the girl said, and stepped down.

SHE was perhaps twenty-two, a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl of an interesting type which Paul had been noticing frequently since he came to Chicago.

She was garbed entirely in white. Her slim, well-shaped hands were white kid gauntlets—a rank extravagance when driving. He could not see her hands, therefore, but he had no fear that they were worn from work. Her small feet were in white buckskin oxfords of special hand-made last, and her white silk hat was a particularly smart, small creation.

Glancing from her to the car, Paul observed that it had a custom-built body on the most notoriously expensive of chassis. Beyond any doubt, and assuming that her start was on some polyglot street, some body close to her had prospered. Papa probably, Paul thought. He put the beginning of her epoch of prosperity before her marriageable age—about the time she was fourteen.

That would have given papa opportunity to enter her at some extravagant finishing school.

"The distance to Detroit," said Paul, "is not only a matter of additional oil and gas. It is so risky, in fact, that if I cannot get you to Detroit on a non-stop flight, for the fun of it, I would not be justified, if anything happened. On the other hand, if it was to save a life or some other happiness, there would be no question."

"In other words, you want to know why I've got to get to Detroit so quickly," she said. "Well, if I tell you, how about the professional secrecy?"

"What?" said Paul.

"Like a lawyer, Papa can go to his lawyer with any old thing, no matter how raw it is, as I understand it, and tell it, and that lawyer simply can't repeat a word. Can a pilot be like that?"

"Oh," said Paul. "Well, this one can't."

"You won't even tell your wife?"

"I have no wife."

"All right. I have to be in Detroit by 4 to rob the mails. That's all."

"What?" said Paul, slightly staggered, for he realized she wasn't joking.

"Oh, I just have to get back a package I mailed from here special delivery first thing this morning to a party who will call for it at 4 o'clock this afternoon. I can't assure you that you're running the risk to save a life; but since you've also dragged in happiness—"

She stopped and looked away.

"Thank you," said Paul. "Shall we hop straight across the lake or around?"

Hopping across, carrying ordinary landing gear, has its disadvantages if anything happens over water; on the other hand, it makes it maybe 50 per cent more certain you reach your hotel before 4 o'clock."

"Then let's have it straight across," she decided, drawing a deep breath.

Paul stepped to a post and rang a bell.

"What's that?" she demanded.

"For my mechanic. He takes his lunch at the farmhouse."

PAUL went about filling his service and store tanks. His mechanic wandered over. "Hopping," he asked, "horribly?"

Paul got into his jacket and hood, which he furnished to a passenger for a high or long flight. "You better have this on," he said to her, and to his mechanic, "What's the lady's car, Jim. Look out for it. We may not get back tonight."

"Name?" Jim demanded of the passenger, in a tone suggestive of no

interest beyond his sense of duty to record the identity of any one leaving property in his care.

She hesitated a second. "P. Alden," she said then.

"Pheobe?" challenged Jim.

"Priscilla," she corrected.

"Address?"

"Again she hesitated. 'Plymouth, Massachusetts,' Paul supplied.

Her dark eyes rested on him with appreciation. "How did you know?" she asked.

Jim openly denied that Paul did know. "She's got an Illinois tag to her car," he interjected; and he recorded the license number and scratched out the name.

The girl now had on Paul's cloak, and she climbed into the airplane. He took his seat beside and slightly in front of her. His was a pilot-and-passenger plane, with engine and airscrew in front. Jim blocked the wheels, and she asked: "What's that for?"

"If we didn't do that, we might cut him in two when he cranks," Paul explained as Jim seized a blade of the propeller. "When he starts the engine, we might leap on him and the pro-

peller might kill him, if we weren't blocked."

"Switch off," said Jim.

"Switch off," assured Paul, and Jim carefully spun the propeller.

"Switch on," requested Jim. "Switch on," warned Paul; and Jim pulled down on a blade of the airscrew, not carelessly at all. Quickly he leaped aside as the engine caught and spun the propeller into a whirl of sudden, roaring invisibility.

Paul throttled down and diminished the racket so that he could be heard when he called, "Ready?" She replied steadily: "Go ahead. I'm glad I learned to fly."

"What?" asked Paul.

"How to crank. If I have to come down, I can do it now."

"Don't you think of it?" yelled Paul, and as Jim kicked away the blocking he opened the throttle, and up they flew, and almost immediately they reached the air over the edge of the lake.

Usually Paul explained to a passenger that she was likely to feel a few "bumps" over the edge of the water on a day like this. He had not warned this girl, and here were the "bumps" rocking them, tossing them, tilting them sideways, dropping them. This girl, though unwarned, merely held tight to the sides of the seat and smiled when Paul turned the engine and they flew straight into the smooth, easy going over the deep water.

OF course any real conversation was impossible; so Paul contented himself with watching her dark eyes glow with delight as she looked about, and his lips part with exhilaration.

Smoothly, with long, soothing dips as they rode the mildest of the air billows, they flew over the lake with engine and airscrew steady and tireless in their rush forward.

The Michigan shore drew up under them all too soon, and Paul gave his attention to his mapboard. He pointed out to her the correspondence of the roads and rivers to the lines on his chart. This was agreeable, but the mapboard emphasized the approach of Detroit, where was that man for whom she was making this flight! It must be a man so completely to control her happiness that she had to hop across the lake to keep him from getting that package. Paul became so intent on this that he forgot the engine. He "missed" badly before Paul realized that much was wrong. Then he put his machine nose-down and dived.

The passenger could not know this was not a fall; but she quietly held on until Paul got the engine going again and he was able to "fatten out" and fly evenly a couple of thousand feet lower than before. When he gazed at her then, she was white, but she smiled with steady lips.

It was only a few minutes later when they began to enter the smoke and dust cloud of Detroit. Paul picked up the engine going and the skirts but with a traveled road beside it, and he landed.

"Well, you are a hummer!" she cried to him enthusiastically as soon as the engine stopped.

"Done up much?" he asked her guiltily, with that dive on his conscience.

"Of course not!" she protested, and stood up. Dropping off her cloak, she reached under her seat for her hat. She opened her vanity bag, looked at herself, patted her hair here and there, and, putting on her hat, she climbed down.

"We've about forty minutes in hand before four o'clock," Paul informed her modestly.

"Yes; you've done your part marvelously—but me! Do you know, I never once thought during that ride!"

"You mean that you expected on the way down here, he said, 'to do some thinking which you had left to the last minute?'"

"That's just it; and when I got up in the air, I didn't do it."

"Perhaps," Paul suggested, "I might carry on for you a bit."

"It was my plan to get that package I came over for. You see?" she hesitated. "It's addressed to Mr. Shelby Selkirk, Hotel Touraine, Detroit. She's Selkirk of Chicago, ask for a room and claim his mail and get the package that way. Of course, being a woman, I might register as his wife and ask for his mail—but—"

"But you're not his wife?" Paul asked quickly.

"No. Of course not."

"Then don't do it," Paul forbade with force, and astonished himself by offering:

"If I pass as a man; so when I get somebody out of this crowd?" he gazed at the curious people approaching—"to look after this bus, I'll go uptown with you."

"Oh, no, you needn't."

Paul picked out an individual to

watch over the airplane and keep other people off, and quickly closed with a satisfactory arrangement.

He led Priscilla to the road, where he hailed a car-for-hire and put her in. "Hotel Touraine, quick," he told the driver, and took his seat beside her.

AS the car sped away, she sat back in the corner, staring at him questioning. "Exactly what do you mean to do?" she inquired.

"Register as Shelby Selkirk of course, and get your package for you."

She nodded slightly as though saying, "I thought so."

"If you're going to register as 'Shel,' she suggested politely, 'hadn't you better change to more ordinary attire? They don't like the look of the Touraine; yet they'll probably expect it in ordinary clothes?'"

"Where'll I get ordinary clothes?" Paul returned.

"Store."

"I haven't enough money," Paul admitted.

"I have," Priscilla assured him, and told the driver: "Stop at the first men's

clothing store where you can get quick service."

The man put on the brakes almost immediately, and Priscilla got out and, when Paul followed her to the door of the clothing store, she told a salesman to show a gray business suit to the gentleman.

The salesman supposed the gentleman was the lady's husband, and Paul let it go at that; he took a gray sack suit into a dressing room, put it on and appeared again to Priscilla, who instantly approved and paid for the suit and also for a cap to match.

Paul followed her to the cab. He felt like a little boy and did not mind much. There was a charming spirit of give and take about this vigorous girl which was markedly unusual; and now it was her turn to take again.

"You get out here," Paul said, stopping the cab a block from the Touraine. "Wait in that doorway for me. If I don't come back in twenty minutes, go to the airplane; I'll meet you there."

Paul backed away from him, opened the door, backed through it quickly and left the building. He entered a dry goods store a few doors down, went through and departed by another exit. He ought to return to that doorway a block the other side of the Touraine where he had an appointment with Priscilla, but he found himself obliged first to clear up a recollection of a bond robbery in Chicago about which he had read in the morning's paper.

ON a corner was a stand with out-of-town newspapers, and he bought a Chicago paper and located the account which printed the list of the serial numbers of the stolen bonds, all Liberty issues of the fourth loan. He cut out the list and, entering a telephone booth which had an opaque door and an electric light, he inspected the numbers on the bonds in his satchel; every one of them had been stolen.

"Well, little one," he gibed himself, as he returned the package to his pocket. "she told you in plain English that she was hiring you to hop her here to pull something raw; and you had to make her your little fairy princess and press yourself into her service."

He was walking at random when a defensive instinct warned him that some one was threatening him.

This was a businesslike, alert, unostentatious individual. "That's a police headquarters operative," Paul said to himself. "The police got the tip after a while. They got to the hotel after she and I both called, and they got my description from the clerk. Of course, I'm Shelby Selkirk to them."

Paul counted twenty-five while Mr. Selkirk watched him from the floor.

"Twenty-five was all?" Paul asked him.

"That's right," Mr. Selkirk confirmed.

Paul returned then to the white envelope. He looked at the brown envelope, addressed in typewriting, which Mr. Selkirk had not even taken the trouble to open. Paul did not take the trouble, either, but put it in his pocket unopened. He was feeling strangely sick.

"What does 'buy sheep and spot cotton' mean?" he questioned Mr. Selkirk on the floor.

"Oh, it's just a market tip," replied Mr. Selkirk, mildly.

"A tip, you mean, to get out quick; or something like that," Paul suggested.

Mr. Selkirk very calmly gazed up from the floor.

Paul advised: "You better stay right where you are for a while."

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to himself, that Mr. Selkirk must have struck him from behind—probably with a blackjack; he had crumpled down within the office, and Mr. Selkirk had entered and shut the door. Mr. Selkirk was standing over him now, but was completely absorbed in the contents of that large, well-filled white envelope, addressed in a feminine hand.

Paul looked around and made sure that Shel and he were alone and, careful to give no warning, he jerked up and grabbed Mr. Selkirk's legs, throwing Mr. Selkirk very violently to the floor. As he struck, Paul let go of the legs and sprang up, grabbing Selkirk's shoulders and pounding him again to the floor. When Shel fought back and kicked, Paul put all his force into a swing of his right foot and hit Mr. Selkirk on the point of his jaw. That proved enough for Shel, who took his turn at lying quietly on the floor. Paul carefully felt over Shel and procured the brown packet and the telegram and, also, a loaded automatic pistol. Then he gathered the scattered contents of the white envelope. They proved to be all Liberty bonds of the fourth issue and each of \$1,000 denomination.

He could give himself up, surrendering the bonds, and tell how it all happened; but he had offered to Priscilla to get her package for her; he had taken that upon himself against her protest. He stepped to the middle of the street where an empty taxi happened to be waiting for the east-west traffic to be freed; and, as the signal was given, he jumped into the cab and cried to the driver, "Harper Hospital; hurry!"

The driver got a fast start. Whistles shrilled behind, but if they were meant to stop Paul's taxi, they failed.

Priscilla was keeping to his orders, she would be waiting for him at the airplane; and Harper Hospital lay in that direction. "I'm really catching an airplane for Chicago!" he told his driver when the taxi was clear of the heavy traffic, and gave the location of the swing. "Rush it and there's \$15 for you." Another taxi, also rushing it, swung out past slower cars.

"I'm trying to pull a getaway with that airplane!" Paul called to the driver. "There's a car after us. Do you think you can beat it?" The

driver shot one glance at Paul and another to the rear. "I know I can!" he assured; and Paul sat back and wondered about Priscilla.

Paul reached the wide suburban road a fair three blocks ahead of the police cab.

"Run as near the plane as you can," he could see that his machine had ceased to be a local curiosity; only one man was there, the watchman, undoubtedly. A girl was there; a girl in white, Priscilla! As she saw the cabs racing to the field, she ran a few yards toward them. Then she ran back to the airplane and was doing something with the watchman. "Paying him off," Paul realized. "Good girl, Priscilla." And at this sight of her, with perception of her quickness and nerve, Paul experienced a marvelous return of feeling for her.

As he jumped the fence and entered the field, Paul saw Priscilla run around to the front of the airplane and reach up.

"She's trying to crank!" On tip-toes, arms extended, she put her weight on the propeller blade and hung there. He yelled frantically. Then the engine caught; the airscrew flew about too quick for eye to see and struck her head. The engine and airscrew roared, moving the airplane forward till the wheels encountered her body.

PAUL reached the machine and thrust down the throttle; then he pulled Priscilla from under the wheels.

"Hello!" she greeted him, staring with dazed eyes. "You—got it?"

"Got it; but you—"

"Good for you! Now let's get out of here. They're after you."

"You?" he stammered again.

"I'm all right. Just knocked—silly. That's all. The engine's going!" she boasted proudly.

She seized the handgrip to the passenger's seat, and he lifted her so that she got to her place. He sprang to his and opened the throttle. The watchman was keeping away from the roaring whirl of the airscrew; but two men from the cab that had pursued Paul were running from the road.

Paul opened the throttle and the airplane moved. As it got into the air, they started shooting but hit nothing. Paul simply flew away.

But he could feel no triumph in his escape; for Priscilla, who had made it possible, was swaying and toppling behind him. She crumpled in her seat, and Paul let the plane ride for itself while he tried to support her with his hands.

She slipped down, down. Paul held

her with one arm and knew that—

—as she lay there, she was dead.

He himself dreamed again about her, about her, strong and well and smiling, and with him riding the sky.

She seemed to cease breathing and he knew he must get her down. Gazing at the ground, he discerned that he was beyond Ann Arbor, and he circled over a wide field, in a farming section, with a big patch of woods into which ran a stream. He landed and lifted her out and carried her under the trees till he found a patch of grass where he laid her down.

He bathed her face with cold water, and when she revived, she lay looking at him with quiet, steady eyes.

"You told me not to crank," she admitted to him. "But if I hadn't, we'd never got away, would we?"

"No," said Paul.

"I remember those men were after you. You got the package—or didn't you?"

"I got it," Paul admitted; he did not like to be reminded of that package.